



## CERTIFICATE OF APPROPRIATENESS STAFF REPORT

**TO:** Historical Affairs and Landmark Review Board (HALRB)  
**FROM:** Serena Bolliger, Historic Preservation Planner  
**DATE:** August 9, 2022  
**SUBJECT:** 5800 Washington Blvd., 22-18, Claude A. Swanson School Historic District

### **Background Information**

Swanson Middle School opened in January 1940 and is the oldest surviving middle school in Arlington County. The building is a grand example of the Colonial Revival (Georgian Classical Revival) style, which was prominent during that time period.

The original school consisted of a 2½-story main block with prominent two-story perpendicular wings flanking each side. It contained 12 classrooms, a library, an auditorium, a small cafeteria, an office, and a gymnasium. Over time, additions were made to the original plan, adding classrooms, office space, and enclosing the original central courtyard. In 1977, a fire, reportedly started by a student as a prank, destroyed most of the school's roof and one of the building's most prominent features, its cupola. The entire building was renovated in 1994, and an addition was built in 2004.

The original main block of the Claude A. Swanson Junior High School sits on a cinder block foundation with a brick water table. The building is constructed of steel joists with cinder block walls faced in six-course Flemish-bond brick. The side gable roof is clad in slate shingles and adorned with a center gable and four matching double-end brick chimneys. A modillion cornice encircles the building. The first-floor windows are ornamented with brick jack-arched lintels and keystones. The entrance gable features a one-story, one-bay portico with fluted Tuscan columns with a large Palladian window above.

The school was built with partial funding from a New Deal-era program initiated by the Roosevelt administration in response to the economic depression of the 1930s. It opened with 15 faculty members and 372 students, who lived all across the County. Swanson Middle School is historically significant for the role it played to support the growth and development of west-central Arlington in the 1940s and 1950s, including the communities of Westover, Highland Park, and Overlee Knolls. It has operated continuously for 82 years. In 2016 the HALRB approved the placement of two (2) relocatable classrooms in the asphalt parking lot parallel to Patrick Henry Drive (CoA 16-18).

### **Proposal**

The proposed project aims to restore operability of the school's original main entrance. As part of this project a ramp and truss bridge to the doorway to make it fully accessible are being proposed along with

the addition of ADA mechanisms and emergency signage, and the relocation of the flagpole to an accessible location adjacent to the entrance.

The school's original main entrance on the building façade was permanently closed. The door was removed and replaced with wooden paneling and double-hung six-over-six sash windows. The applicant proposes to install two 7' x 3' swinging InsulPour Thermal Break metal and glass doors under a 2'2" x 6'4" transom. A vertical access pole would be installed with a card reader and a push button for operating the accessible door in the portico.

To meet the 2'4" height difference between the exterior grade and the first floor of the building, the applicant proposes to construct two connecting walkways. One 71'9" concrete ramp parallel to, but separate from, the building with access from either end will be combined with a 16'3" long aluminum truss or bridge connecting the ramp with the doorway. The concrete ramp would have a black powder coated aluminum railing. The metal bridge would be McNichols aluminum bar grating with steel supports, a 1 ½" circular handrail, and multi-color steel ¼" cables either randomly spaced, or with even spacing every 3".

New lighting in the portico would include compact LED ceiling-mounted downlights. The applicant is also presenting two options for two egress light poles on either side of the truss bridge from the concrete ramp to the door. Plantings will be installed around the new walkway.

### **DRC Review**

The DRC heard this case at its August 3, 2022, virtual meeting. Mr. Dudka confirmed that all the elements being proposed were going to "bypass" the historic elements so that they could essentially be removed and not physically affect the existing structure. Ms. Hamm-Modley, the project's architect, confirmed that this was correct. The commissioners asked questions about the material make-up, durability, and spacing design of the colored cables on the metal bridge. Ms. Gwin requested a different photograph be submitted as an example. Ms. Gwin also stated a concern that the cable spacing would block the historic façade, but Mr. Dudka expressed support for the cable design. The commissioners asked for a drawing at a larger scale of the cable design so they could actually see what the cables would look like in place. Mr. Dudka asked some questions about the plantings and the river rock around the ramp; Ms. Hamm-Modley stated it was all part of a design to allow for drainage near the entrance (they also plan to include downspouts trenched into the ground leading from the building to the river rock area). Finally, Mr. Dudka asked for axonometric drawing (or similar) that would give the HALRB a 3D sense of the project. The other commissioners agreed, and Mr. Davis added that he would like to see a final site plan.

The commissioners agreed it should be placed on the Discussion Agenda for the August 17<sup>th</sup>, 2022, HALRB virtual meeting and that they would recommend approval if the proposed updates to the drawings were made. Mr. Dudka asked staff to check Swanson's design guidelines for if the door needed to be wood; Ms. Tawney checked after the fact, and the guidelines do not require wooden doors.

### **Recommendation**

The Historic Preservation Program (HPP) staff recommends approval of the application. The restoration of the working doorway would allow it to return to a working entrance as it was originally. This improvement complies with the last sentence of Standard #6 of the *Secretary of the Interior's Standards for Rehabilitation* "Replacement of missing features shall be substantiated by documentary, physical, or pictorial evidence." Similarly, photos show that while the eastern side of the entrance wasn't the original



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location of the flagpole, it was located there at least in 1962 before being moved to its current location, making the relocation not inappropriate.

The proposed concrete ramp and metal truss will increase access to the building and make it usable for more generations of children. Furthermore, since the concrete ramp is not attached to the historic school, and given that the metal truss is entirely removable, both comply with Standards #9 and #10 of the *Secretary of the Interior's Standards for Rehabilitation*:

Standard #9: New additions, exterior alterations, or related new construction will not destroy historic materials, features, and spatial relationships that characterize the property. The new work will be differentiated from the old and will be compatible with the historic materials, features, size, scale and proportion, and massing to protect the integrity of the property and its environment.

Standard #10: New additions and adjacent or related new construction will be undertaken in such a manner that, if removed in the future, the essential form and integrity of the historic property and its environment would be unimpaired.

The installations of the lights and the access poles are required for increasing accessibility and usability of the historic building. There is evidence that continued use and relevance for new generations is central to encouraging preservation and retention of historic structures and therefore, we find the additions appropriate for supporting the operability of the school and the historic main entrance.